

This is the unedited version of a column which appeared in *Australian Doctor* in 2002. The published version may have had minor changes.

### **Media Bites:** Seeking asylum

When planning her annual leave last year, Perth paediatrician Annie Sparrow decided to have a working holiday in outback Australia.

She had heard enough from a friend working with asylum seekers in the detention centre at Woomera, South Australia, to be convinced that her services could be useful there. So she picked up the phone to Australasian Correctional Management, the company which runs the centre.

Even now, several months after finishing her stint at Woomera, the catch in Dr Sparrow's voice reveals just how traumatic she found the experience, witnessing the overwhelming misery of children and adults being held in harsh conditions.

"I found it so incredibly difficult to work there and I could not imagine being incarcerated there for more than a couple of weeks, let alone months and years," she says. "For children born in detention, it's a terrible place."

Dr Sparrow is one of many health professionals whose experiences working with asylum seekers and refugees, in detention centres and the broader community, feature in a recent report from a broad alliance of health groups, including the medical colleges, AMA, Doctors Reform Society and nursing organisations.

It calls for children and their families to be removed from detention, an immediate independent review of detainees' health, an end to confidentiality agreements for detention centre staff, a national summit on asylum seekers, and the end of universal mandatory detention, temporary protection visas, and family separations.

Given the strong political focus on asylum seekers, the report might have been expected to hit the headlines - even if only because it is unusual for so many health groups to agree on anything, let alone such a contentious issue.

The report also contains plenty of fodder for media stories, with many harrowing case studies of children and adults suffering serious psychological and physical problems as a result of detention or lack of access to services in the community.

But most Australians, apart from those tuned to the ABC, probably remain unaware of the report. Professor Richard Larkins, president of the Royal Australasian College of Physicians, says he was surprised and disappointed it didn't get wider coverage.

This may be a reflection of news values - conflict among medical groups is always more likely to attract attention than agreement. It is also a comment on the commercial values which drive much coverage; media managers know that stories about asylum seekers are unlikely to boost ratings or readership.

The media may also have missed a broader story behind the report; that there are the beginnings of a groundswell of activism amongst doctors on this issue.

Dr Rohan Vora, a GP who also contributed to the report, is part of a network of 65 doctors and other health professionals in Brisbane providing free services to asylum seekers and refugees in the community, some of whom who are not allowed to work and are denied government-funded health and welfare services. Many have serious depression exacerbated by the extra uncertainty of temporary protection visas and severe poverty.

Network members also spend much time negotiating with hospitals and other health services, and trying to obtain medicines, food and accommodation for their clients.

Dr Vora says similar networks are operating in Darwin, Sydney and Melbourne. "There definitely is a groundswell as more and more doctors and nurses discover what's going on," he says.

Mark Harris, Professor of General Practice at the University of NSW, provides free consultations to clients of the Asylum Seekers Centre in Sydney, most of whom have no Medicare card or income.

Despite the difficulties involved - hospitals send debt collectors to

harass his patients, many of whom cannot afford the tests, medications and other treatments they need - Professor Harris has been heartened that many specialists are prepared to see asylum seekers without charge.

The Government has shown no sign of heeding the profession's concerns, but Professor Larkins says the alliance will not let the issue drop. "In the end people do have to listen," he says. "We can't be ignored completely."

That will depend, to some extent at least, on what the headlines say.

\* The report is available at [www.racp.edu.au](http://www.racp.edu.au)